

NOTES ON A MOUNTAIN MAN

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THIS IS AN ESSAY about Ernest T. Bass, “a fictional character on the American TV sitcom *The Andy Griffith Show*.” This is an essay about Ernest T. Bass informed by Wikipedia. And so this, too, is an essay about us. Or them.

This is an essay about Howard Jerome Morris, a Jewish man born in the Bronx in 1919—the classically trained Shakespearean actor who played Ernest T. Bass and whose entry on Wikipedia links to a page titled “Mountain Man.”

“A mountain man is a male trapper and explorer who lives in the wilderness.”

When my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather moved into the mountains where I was raised, the map labeled the area as only “The Wilderness.”

In a private college full of smart, wealthy northeasterners, someone once heard me speak and called me “a mountain man.” Immediately, I saw Ernest T.

Howdy do to you and you.

I loved Ernest T. more than any character on *The Andy Griffith Show*.

This is an essay about me. *It's me, it's me, it's Ernest T.* This is an essay about a hundred acres in a community named Fruitland in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Or, if you like, this is an essay about a massive region reaching from Alabama to New York. About how every single one of the people living in that streak of the map is a male trapper. Not thousands of male trappers, but—like the body of Christ—we together form Male Trapper. Some an eye. Some a coonskin cap.

Ernest T. Bass appeared in only 5 out of 249 episodes. He threw rocks and wanted to find love.

I loved Ernest T. more than any character on *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Some museums across the country celebrate an Ernest T. Bass Day in their Natural Science sections, inviting people to bring any rocks they're unable to identify. Ernest T. Bass Day takes place on April 1, Ernest T.'s birthday. Citation needed.

My first ancestor to come here to The Wilderness in 1785 grew rich, in part due to his whiskey still. He died in the woods, either bushwhacked or clumsy, at the age of ninety-five. I was born surrounded by the houses of my uncles and grandparents and great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents in 1981. I spent most of my childhood in the woods. My first CD purchase was Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*.

Howard Morris picked up a menu of Southern accents while stationed at Fort Bragg during World War II. From them, he brought Ernest T. to life. He later sang the "Eep Oop Ork Ah Ah" song as Jet Screamer on *The Jetsons*. In 1989, he voiced the French gangster cat named Monte De Zar on *Chip 'N Dale Rescue Rangers*.

I am not a French gangster cat.

I never once considered myself a mountain man until I left the mountains. I didn't know what a mountain man was. I still don't know what a mountain man is.

“Mountain men were most common in the North American Rocky Mountains from about 1810 through to the 1880s (with a peak population in the early 1840s).”

A mountain man is a Jew from the Bronx.

Citation needed.

Ernest T. first appeared on *The Andy Griffith Show* in the episode “Mountain Wedding.” After meeting him, Andy says, “If you ask me, this Ernest T. Bass is a strange and weird character.”

I loved Ernest T. more than any character on *The Andy Griffith Show*.

One of the earliest portraits of the mountains by an outsider was Will Wallace Harney’s 1873 travelogue: “A Strange Land and a Peculiar People.”

In college, one of my classes took a weekend trip to the mountains. On a hike, I left the trail and tiptoed a tree fallen across a creek. I picked my way along the rocks peeking from the water, finding sure footing by instinct—avoiding slick algae and shaky stones—so that I could sit by the water and skip rocks on the other side. Two guys started out behind me. Within a few steps, they’d both slipped into the cold water. “You can’t follow him out here,” a girl hollered from behind us. “He’s a mountain man.”

“The mountain man, in the Southern Appalachians,” Donald Culross Peattie wrote in 1943, “is not a real mountaineer, as are some of the Swiss living at giddy altitudes; he is a forest man.”

When I walked into the woods of our family land as a boy, I became Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett. I roamed, carrying a canteen in a fur pouch, a cap gun, and a coonskin hat—all purchased at *Dollywood*. I hid in caves of rhododendron. I dropped down the steep bank of the creek and threw rocks at unseen enemies. I might kill a bear or I might camouflage my whole being into the land of my ancestors and never go inside again. Or I might give it up and play Nintendo.

“The life of a mountain man was rugged: many did not last more than several years in the wilderness.”

The Wilderness my ancestor came upon, at the age of seventy-five, was named Flat Rock. Later, it became a mountain getaway destination for wealthy plantation owners in the South. Today, New Yorkers build big houses and retire here.

Years after playing Ernest T. Bass, Howard Morris directed *Richie Rich*, a Saturday-morning animated series about the son of “the world’s richest parents.” In 1994, Macaulay Culkin starred in a film based on the character. Though *Richie Rich* was set in Chicago, most of the movie was filmed at the Biltmore Estate, a 135,280-square-foot house built by George Vanderbilt in the late nineteenth century—it sits twenty-five miles from the Wilderness of my people.

“It is a strange gorgeous colossus in a vast void of desolation,” Henry James wrote to Edith Wharton of the Biltmore Estate in 1905.

This is an essay about being from a vast void of desolation.

To announce his arrival to Mayberry from the mountains, Ernest T. Bass breaks windows. To court women, Ernest T. Bass breaks windows. To threaten men, Ernest T. Bass breaks windows. To send a letter, Ernest T. Bass breaks windows. He is a connoisseur of window-breaking rocks. Often he brings them from home, toting the rocks down the mountain before he commences to smashing up the town. Town is a place that cannot hold Ernest T. He is a man for wild, uncivilized mountains. In Mayberry, he skips through traffic, yelping and laughing—an escaped monkey in a tattered vest and big boots. He cannot be contained, resisting every social norm pressed upon him, escaping from lockup as if by magic only to appear grinning in his ratty britches on the street again: *You ain’t seen the last of Ernest T. Bass.*

Wikipedia lists Ernest T.’s occupation as “troublemaker, hillbilly.”

My cousins and I found a glass medicine bottle in the woods. In it, we poured gas from a can in the tractor shed. Then, we rolled pages from an old Farmer's Almanac, like a snake, and stood them in the bottle. We liked to watch *The A-Team*. We took some matches and our Molotov cocktail and headed down the Old Road, past our great-great grandparents' empty house and toward the creek and barn. We stopped beside a good-size mud puddle, set the bottle on a rock in the middle of the water, and lit the paper. Before long, one of us got nervous about the flame from the Farmer's Almanac pages, the way it shot up high from the fumes and nearly touched the plants bending over the road. One of us got nervous about the possibility of an explosion a few feet from our young bodies. One of us said to throw rocks into the puddle, in hopes we'd splash enough muddy water onto the bottle to quench the flame before it reached the gas. One of us didn't understand this plan. He said, "Y'all keep missing. Watch this." He smashed the bottle with a precise toss. Water turned to flame. We stepped back and watched what had just been flat, dark water on a dirt road in Fruitland, NC, transform into the sun. We ran back into the woods.

"Television programs of the 1960s such as *The Real McCoys*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and especially *The Beverly Hillbillies*, portrayed the 'hillbilly' as backwards but with enough wisdom to outwit more sophisticated city folk."

One of the earliest recorded uses of "hillbilly" comes from a *New York Journal* article in 1900: "a Hill-Billie is a free and untrammled white citizen of Tennessee, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him."

I never rightly learned to shoot a gun. While my uncles and grandfather and cousins hunted, I never had much interest. I liked to pass from sight in the woods. I'll admit to breaking a few windows, only once with a rock, but my people didn't touch spirits. They're an abstaining lot, and I didn't have a drink until I was twenty-one on a beach in Costa Rica. I brush my teeth four times a day and own more shoes than most men would admit.

In his first episode, Ernest T. tries to convince Charlene Darling to marry him by boasting of his best attributes: “I can do chin-ups, I’m the best rock thrower in the county, and I’m saving up for a gold tooth.”

My junior-year prom date was named Kwang Hee. We went to the strange gorgeous colossus that is the Biltmore Estate in my mint green Ford Probe and danced to R. Kelly.

The word *stereotype* was first used in printmaking in 1798 “to describe a printing plate that duplicated any typography.” Once created, the stereotype could be used in place of the original. With a stereotype in hand, who needs the original?

I play the banjo.

One of those Molotov-cocktail-exploding cousins lives a stone’s throw from the spot of the burning mud puddle, in a trailer with thirteen guns. Another one of those Molotov-cocktail-exploding cousins is a DJ in Chicago, living in a high-rise condo with his Jewish wife. We are all Male Trapper.

“The ‘classic’ hillbilly stereotype reached its current characterization during the years of the Great Depression, when many mountaineers left their homes to find work in other areas of the country.” During this great migration from the mountains—to places like Detroit and Chicago and Mayberry—the rest of the country cocked its head to the side to catch a load of these mountain men coming into town.

Howdy do to you and you.

In one episode, Ernest T. comes into town, throws a rock through the window of a house, and then goes inside to the party. He intends—as always—to fall in love. Instead, he sticks his hand in the punch bowl and eats the watermelon rinds and runs off giggling. Andy decides to help civilize Ernest T. Andy always decides to help Ernest T., but Ernest T. is resistant. He speaks through his nose, he doesn’t understand unnecessary niceties, he throws rocks. “Now, Ernest T., we’re just trying to help you fit into society,” Andy says.

I imagine mountain men arriving to Cleveland and Detroit in 1930, 1940. They open their mouths and windows break.

In college, I stopped saying *reckon*. I kept an eye on *used to could*. I flattened out those long i's that rounded my mouth. I sent Ernest T. back to the mountains and settled down into my seat. Inside. Windows closed.

I don't chew my cabbage twice and you ain't heard the last of Ernest T. Bass.

In another episode:

Andy: He's made a lot of progress since the last time he was in town.

Barney: Oh, so he shaved the back of his neck; what's so great about that?

"*Stereotype* derives from the Greek words *steros*, meaning 'firm, solid' and *typos*, meaning 'impression.'"

I'm supposed to say that Ernest T. is wise, that he carries more sense than those townfolk trying to dress him up or educate him or keep him indoors. It's not true. Ernest T. is, as Barney Fife forever names him: *a nut*.

I loved Ernest T. more than any character on *The Andy Griffith Show*.

I could never get comfortable out of the mountains. I lived in other countries, in a big city, at the beach, in the rural Midwest. I felt forever itchy in those landscapes, always looking at the horizon, waiting for some land to rise up that I could run off into. Eventually, I moved back to the Wilderness.

Ernest T. isn't wise, but he is his own man. And he is willing to fight to stay that way, no matter what Town tells him. In the face of their fine dining or jails, he laughs and runs off. Back into the mountains. Ernest T. is in the town, but not of the town.

I live in the Wilderness with city water.

Right or wrong, I'm here to fight. Unless you run away with fright. And if you wonder who I be . . .

Okay, okay, here it is: a stereotype is a window. Flat, clear, firm.

Every morning I drive past my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. I wave to the tall headstone above where he rests on his former Wilderness—alongside a paved road and massive church and a housing development—and head off to teach college. In rooms full of male trappers, I hope what I'm saying when I say *we're making art here* is *we're breaking windows*. I'm saying: Go down the mountain if you must, but for the love of God take a rock.

A rock is you.

It's me. It's me.

(Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted material comes from Wikipedia.)